

*Citation for published version:*

Evans, H 2021 'Beyond resistance: the role of prefiguration in social movements addressing the climate crisis'  
Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing, no. 66, Centre for Development Studies, pp. 1-29.

*Publication date:*  
2021

[Link to publication](#)

**University of Bath**

**Alternative formats**

If you require this document in an alternative format, please contact:  
[openaccess@bath.ac.uk](mailto:openaccess@bath.ac.uk)

**General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

**Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

## Bath Papers in International Development and Wellbeing

---

No: 66/2021

### **Beyond resistance: the role of prefiguration in social movements addressing the climate crisis**

**Hamish Evans**

Department of Social & Policy Sciences, University of Bath

---

© Hamish Evans 2021

All rights reserved. Attention is drawn to the fact that copyright of this working paper rests with the author and copyright of any previously published materials included may rest with third parties. A copy of this working paper has been supplied on condition that anyone who consults it understands that they must not copy it or use material from it except as permitted by law or with the consent of the author or other copyright owners, as applicable.

Published by:

Centre for Development Studies

University of Bath

Calverton Down, Bath

BA2 7AY

<https://www.bath.ac.uk/research-centres/centre-for-development-studies>

ISSN 2040-••3151

**Series Editors:**

James Copestake

Cynthia Kamwengo

**Corresponding author**

Hamish Evans

Email: [hamishevans@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:hamishevans@hotmail.co.uk)

The Centre for Development Studies at the University of Bath is an interdisciplinary collaborative research centre critically engaging with international development policy and practice.

**Beyond resistance: the role of prefiguration in social movements  
addressing the climate crisis**

**Hamish Evans**

**Department of Social & Policy Sciences, University of Bath**

**Abstract**

The concept of building alternatives through *prefiguration* has been applied to social movements, particularly in Latin America (Dinerstein 2014). This paper extends prefigurative analysis and praxis to the environmental movement, focusing on Extinction Rebellion in the UK. It builds on an emerging reframing of social movements as autonomies beyond resistance, encapsulating both creation and experimentation. On the relationship between oppositional activism and resistance, the paper points towards a necessary union of deconstructive and constructive work for 21st century social movements, to birth a new society in the shell of the old. This situates the adversarial and exemplary as synergies rather than trade-offs in the work of social change.

**Keywords:** prefiguration, social movements, extinction rebellion, environment

## 1. Introduction

Social movements have been typically regarded through the lens of ‘resistance’ throughout the 20th century despite their role in creating the alternative models that are used in the 21st century. The framing of these movements through the narrow lens of ‘resistance’ perceives their work as purely oppositional and fighting against the dominant current of global neoliberalism (Gibson-Graham 2006). This not only undermines the real successes of social movements but disregards their reconstructive potential (Raekstad 2018). The concept of prefiguration provides a lens by which to examine these assumptions of social change, and frame new social movements through a broader lens ‘beyond resistance’. This translates to a practical embodiment of hope, creation of alternatives and prefigurative praxis – defined by Raekstad and Gradin (2020) as “the deliberate experimental implementation of desired future social relations and practices in the here-and-now.”

Prefiguration has a rich history through autonomous movements that aim to embody and create alternatives through their actions. This intersects with but is not limited to anarchist, syndicalist and radical movements of the 20th century. Notably, the Movement for a New society in 1970s America, which created counter-institutions and collectives whilst simultaneously taking direct action against military and violent powers, exploring a “delicate balance between opposing and proposing” (p.12, Cornell 2011). More recent social movements have adopted a prefigurative approach in differing contexts and styles as the praxis evolves and learns from mistakes. Autonomous movements in Latin America and the grassroots revolution in Rojava have created spaces of both resistance and co-creation, and thus found a symbiosis between the adversary and exemplary (Federici 2015).

There is however a significant literature gap in analysing prefiguration’s relationship to the contemporary environmental movement, at a time when the climate crisis demands transformative changes in all aspects of society (UN IPCC 2018). It is this gap which the following research process aims to explore, through engaging practically and intellectually with a sample of movement leaders. This is important because the environmental movement has thus far failed to spark or catalyse the systemic shifts demanded of the ecological crisis, as recent COP26 discussions have emphasised. This invites an opening for both new and old strategy to emerge, and for seemingly different strategies to find a meeting point for social leverage. The transformative shifts (e.g. creating alternatives) must be combined with the necessary nonviolent resistance and challenging of power in order to create interstitial spaces for the changes to emerge and expand beyond the marginal (Wright 2013). This paper examines this thesis through a discussion of the potential and limits of prefiguration in ecological activism.

## 2. Literature Review

This section grounds the in discussion of the concepts of radical social change, autonomy and social movements. Second, it unpicks the concept of prefiguration as a tool for social change, and thirdly it examines the concept of active hope within a psychosocial framework. This builds on Dinerstein (2014), who argues that prefiguration is a process of learning hope, and autonomous social movements are an organisational tool for this process. The inclusion of hope in this ‘sociology of emergences’ allows activists to engage with the not-yet reality (Bloch 1986), and categorises autonomy as prefigurative. This interplay of activism, prefiguration and hope is central to my research inquiry.

### 2.1 Social change and autonomy

Solnit (2016) examines how two stories of social change can be told of the 20th century movements and reforms. The first is of futile resistance to inevitable capitalisation, whereby social movement gains were incremental and ‘failed’ to avert the social, economic and environmental crises of today. A second story adopts a more nuanced and long-term theory of change, history and hope, evidenced by the previously unimaginable transformations from slavery, unequal voting rights, colonialism, environmental protections and freedom of expression through the myriad of prefigurative social movements for justice (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). The forces of coloniality, patriarchy, racism and anthropocentrism remain prevalent in the physical and imaginal spaces of today, and yet they are simultaneously being challenged and re-imagined in revolutionary ways (Holloway 2002). Solnit’s (2016) holistic understanding of social change is reflected by recent sociological and psycho-social literature in this age of ‘globalised resistance’ (Diani and Della Porta 1998; Hoggett 2019). The aim of this research is to explore the space beyond this resistance paradigm, which also creates, exceeds and reconstructs (Dinerstein 2014). This requires looking at the broader lens of social change (macro) and also examining the personal drives and models for change (micro), through the lives of activists and social movement strategy. The intersection of these macro and micro forces is situated within a psychosocial understanding of the world which necessarily brings the personal into the political and vice versa (Hoggett 2019).

The concept of autonomy is central to this topic. Prefigurative movements tend to be autonomous by definition; they begin by contradicting the dominant paradigm and favour a more direct democracy, inclusive decision-making and decentralised non-hierarchical power structures, beyond the state (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). This has been more widely documented in social justice and anti-capitalist movements (Dinerstein 2014) but the literature is more scarce in relevance to the environmental movement – the focus of this research. And yet, the concept has underpinned the history of the environmentalism, from the direct-action camps of the UK road protests to the indigenous nature protection movements in Latin America (Solnit 2016; Klein 2019). Modern and Western forms of environmentalism have been limited to incremental reforms and often been co-opted by

mainstream sustainability (Wahl 2016), 'green growth' (Kallis and Hickel 2020) and techno-optimism narratives (Jackson 2017). There are deeper threads underpinning the movement rooted in its conception – the voice of deep ecology from Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' (1962). Even deeper roots lie historically in the indigenous worldviews of interconnectedness between humans and nature, rendering even the most radical western environmental movements as anthropocentric (Escobar 2018). Environmental activism has thus reflected the tension between deep and shallow ecologies - light and dark shades of green (Carson 1962). Shallow activism confronts green issues in a reactive, reformist way, whilst deeper activism approaches the root of the systemic violence towards nature and people (Naess 1973). One research aim is to examine the position of the contemporary environmental movement on this spectrum.

## 2.2 Prefiguration

One motivation for this paper was to analyse how closely the environmental movement sits with a prefigurative position on the spectrum of activism between polarities of shallow surface activism and deeper systemic activism. Discussion of social movements typically focuses on the strategies and outcomes, and the oppositional actions to confront the current issue/injustice (Chatterton and Pickerill 2010). However, there is an emerging body of literature that broadens our conceptualisation of activism to include the integrity of a movement, its ways of organising and collective creation of alternative paradigms (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). This latter perspective focuses on the world that the movement is for, beyond the sole emphasis on the world it is against (Dinerstein 2014). This perspective suggests that we need a more nuanced understanding of social change, that includes the prefigurative, regenerative activism that are co-creating the new paradigm.

Highlight the role of prefiguration does not imply it is the only tool needed, and acknowledge the role of direct action, protest and resistance, especially in adverse conditions (Yates 2020). Prefiguration is an under-acknowledged tool, and a useful concept that encapsulates the practical creation of alternatives that model the new paradigm in the shell of the old (Raekstad 2018). Prefiguration can be seen as the lived practice of hope, as it embodies the belief that a new world is not only possible, but the physical construction of it can begin in the present, even whilst opposing the destructive paradigm (Dinerstein 2014). This applies to social movements that take a prefigurative approach to activism, through their ways of organising, strategies of nonviolence and practical embodiment of values/ideals (Yates 2015). Prefiguration is not, however, pretending that we live in social harmony or a just world. Rather it can be viewed as a deeper activism that confronts the roots of injustice through active modelling and experimentation of what things could be like, in order to build bridges between old paradigms and new – to catalyse and direct a necessary shift in consciousness, drives and power (Raekstad and Gradin 2020).

While growing, the literature on prefiguration remains sparse in mainstream narratives and

academia. It can also easily be misunderstood and misapplied, partly due to vague and unrefined definitions. Boggs is credited with coining the term in 1977, referring to “those forms of social relations, decision-making, culture, and human experience that are its ultimate goal” (p.100, Boggs 1977). This builds upon an age-old concept of means-ends equivalence and action/practice based upon lived values rather than outcomes. Early Christianity called it ‘phenomenal prophecy’; the intention to prefigure the vision/prophecy of Christ (Raekstad 2018). Margaret Mead also introduced the word before Boggs under the term ‘prefigurative culture’, referring to a local autonomous group that aim to create a society based upon the needs of their children and future generations, realised in the now (Mead, Sieben and Straub 1973). Boggs (1977) widened this concept beyond the cultural into the political and sociological realms, and contemporary prefiguration scholars have applied this to social movements, autonomy and theories of change (Dinerstein 2014, Yates 2015). Prefiguration can also be defined in terms of what it is not: instrumentalism - utilising any means in order to achieve the desired ends (Eldridge 1998).

### Critiques

Three key critiques of prefiguration recur in the literature. First, and most commonly, academics critique the efficacy of prefigurative action in comparison to instrumentalist, goal-orientated ‘strategy’. Yates (2020) acknowledges the lack of empirical evidence for prefiguration effectiveness, but explains why it is a misleading research inquiry, for the ripple effects in narrative, transformation and system change are unimaginably complex and cannot be narrowed down to instrumental logic. A second critique of prefiguration points to its generalisability and broadness. Sitrin (2016) argues that the concept can be used to explain anything which is emergent from something else – which may apply to everything, rendering the theory weak in falsifiability. Matured definitions of prefiguration (Raekstad and Gradin 2020) address this criticism by focusing on the intentionality of prefigurative action, the conscious acknowledgement of change agents in their practice of future consciousness in the present. Whilst many realities could unfold from critical moments in history, (e.g. collapse or transformation in response to climate change), the more likely outcome is impacted by an active prefigurative approach, rather than path dependency. A third concern about prefiguration is its over-emphasis on the cultural and expressive spheres of autonomy, therefore glossing over the pragmatic, strategic and oppositional tools to achieve social transformation. Prefigurative advocates argue that the two are not necessarily distinct, and the whole concept of prefiguration is strategic as well as moral (Dinerstein 2014). The example of direct democracy and social ecology in Rojava (Syria) is an example of a form of prefiguration that is boldly direct and strategic whilst also prefiguring a new way of politics amidst adverse political-military conditions (Federici 2015). Further criticism of prefiguration for its exclusivity, insularity and reliance on decentralised decision-making are explored below.



## Pillars

The pillars of prefiguration identified in this review are: (i) building of alternatives, (ii) experimentation, (iii) subjective experience, (iv) 'personal is political' and (v) formal/informal organisational structure shifts. The fundamental pillar of prefiguration is (i) the building of alternatives to the current paradigm. This alludes to the reconstruction of multiple overlapping spheres of society, which can be applied to politics, economics, education, culture and other levers for change. As the new paradigm is not fully known or conceptualised, this involves a certain degree of (ii) experimentation, in order to co-create the vision and language of a future, manifested in the present (Yates 2020, Raekstad and Gradin 2020). Another aspect of this is the role of (iii) subjective experience – how an individual's participation in prefiguration is empowering and catalyses personal evolution alongside the macro-systemic shifts. There is a void in the literature on this topic, which weaves together prefigurative activism with a psychosocial understanding of change. Yates' (2015) 'subjective function' refers to the personal transformations of those involved in collective prefigurative action. The participation in the action/practice itself has a ripple effect within and around the participants, through a shift in their imagination of what is possible and a tasting of the future they aim to create. This concept is further explored and also critiqued in the latter discussion of this paper.

A central tenet of prefiguration is that (iv) 'the personal is political' (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). Neoliberalism has driven a false dichotomy and separation between personal and political, which has disregarded issues of gender, race, lifestyle and well-being as 'personal' issues, not relevant to large scale political organisation (Solnit 2016). Greater understanding of human interconnectedness suggests that self, others and society are inseparable and reflect each other in myriad ways. This points to a more holographic view of the universe whereby each 'part' reflects the whole and vice-versa. Developments in quantum physics are proving this in the physical world, and psycho-sociology is increasingly recognising the same patterns in human structures (Capra and Luisi 2014). The feminism movement of the 1960s set the groundwork for the intersection of personal and political understandings – through politicising gendered norms in everyday society (e.g. the household). Applying this to prefiguration, Raekstad and Gradin (2020) highlight that the hierarchies and power dynamics in our personal lives reflect and feed into the hierarchies and power dynamics of our socio-political systems, arguing that prefiguration must therefore address (v) informal, domestic and personal as well as the formal organisational injustices. For example, a prefigurative approach in feminism must necessarily de-construct and re-construct gender norms and dynamics in the personal/domestic spheres of informal organisation as well as the macro-systemic gender practices and inequalities in the mainstream political economy (Prügl 1999). This leads us to a psychosocial understanding of change and prefigurative action: the subjective internal experiences of an individual are inseparable from the social context. Hoggett (2019) applies this psychosocial concept to climate activism, highlighting the internal forces that are central to action and inaction, through mechanisms of denial, disavowal, hope

and transformation. Prefiguration can similarly be viewed through a psychosocial lens, as an active tool/manifestation of hope.

## 2.3 Hope

Hope has been framed historically as either an evil or a gift to society – early Christian perspectives banished hope from this land, leaving it in the Pandora's box among all other evils. Other analysts of this metaphor propose the intentional placement of hope (by Zeus) in the box/jar as a gift to humanity amongst the evils of life, a liberating tool to enable action amidst evils (McGrath 2016). This ancient debate is highly relevant today and in the context of this paper, examining the role of hope in confronting ecological destruction and mass extinction. Early Greek philosophers tended to associate hope with uninformed wishful thinking, driving non-rational desires and behaviours. Thomas Aquinas and others (in a minority) resisted this notion and proposed a view of hope as wilful habit of the mind, based on a holistic view of life that embraces possibility (Bloch 1986). Historical debates have typically subjected hope to the realms of philosophy (Solnit 2010). However, the revival of hope in sociology, social movement literature and ecopsychology is redefining hope as an undercurrent of social change and action, rooted not in the abstract but in the concrete experiences, drives and power dynamics of social change agents (Ojala 2012). The implications of hope for political sociology have been under-recognised, but the bridge between these two cousins is being made and strengthened in emerging literature and practice (Solnit 2016).

Prefiguration and hope naturally interweave, and yet, other contributors to the prefiguration literature have been cautious in associating them too closely (Maeckelberg 2011). Again, rooted in early Christian ideas, hope has typically been framed as either a help or a hindrance to social change work (Bloch 1986). This false dichotomy disregards the potential for hope to be an underpinning and necessity for any willful action aimed at shifting the paradigm. Contemporary literature reframes the concept of hope as an active process that drives transformation, rather than a passive wish or blind optimism (Dinerstein 2015). Joanna Macy refers to this as 'active hope', which is a way of being in the world that is driven by the possibilities of multiple realities emerging from the current one (Macy and Johnstone 2012). This builds upon Bloch's (1986) work that articulates hope as a tool for engagement with the not-yet reality, in order to nurture its seeds in the present. Underpinning this philosophy is the view of reality as an open process, in contradiction to the neoliberal assertion that 'there is no alternative' (Dinerstein 2014). According to Solnit (2016), this element of open reality and possibility arises from uncertainty – it is the sheer unpredictability of outcome that allows space for hope and gives no room for cynicism or passive despair. Active hope does, however, allow for grief, and deep confrontation of the harsh realities in this world (Macy and Johnstone 2012). This nuanced view of hope, framed as pro-active engagement, is a pillar for this research and acts as a glue joining together the chapters and themes of discussion.

Psycho-social literature is relevant here as it frames the feelings of grief and hope as sisters that must come together for true personal and social transformation (Weintrobe 2013). This dance between our inner responses and their evolving social context is the basis for psychosocial understandings of action and inaction (Hoggett 2013). Psychological and sociological literature tend to separate the two realms of action (inner and outer), whilst psychosocial approaches are transdisciplinary and weave together the emotive and activated connotations of hope (Hoggett 2019). This psycho-social lens is crucial to understanding prefiguration as an active medium for hope, especially in the context of climate and ecological crisis, where eco-anxiety and despair are prevalent (Weintrobe 2013). Ojala (2012) alludes to ‘authentic hope’ – a radically honest engagement with the world and its complexity, including the potential for radical transformation to emerge from crisis and struggle. These threads of hope that weave between Macy, Ojala, Solnit and other literature are speaking to a sociological perspective on hope that is inseparable from prefigurative activism – one cannot simply feel hope but must act and reproduce hope through co-creation of desirable alternatives. This perspective views prefiguration as a tool/medium for hope-work.

## 2.4 Crisis and Rebellion

This final literature review section brings the broad discussion on social change into focus through the context of the climate emergency and the response of Extinction Rebellion. The climate and ecological crisis - “the defining issue of our time” (p.7, UN 2018) – is already having severe impacts globally as we reach ecological tipping points and transgress planetary boundaries (Rockstrom et al. 2009). The UN stated an urgent and stark warning in 2018 that we have only 12 years to take transformative and systemic action. Since this calling, emissions have continued to rise, wildfires have become normalised, and thousands more species have become extinct (Klein 2019). Earth systems are being deeply affected by human activity, so much so that this geological era is being defined as the Anthropocene (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016). The theoretical understanding of climate change has been understood since the 1960s (Gough 2017) and technical/practical solutions have existed for at least as long (Monbiot 2017). Given that these solutions have failed to be implemented at scale, contemporary literature has moved on to explore the psychosocial, internal and systemic reasons for inaction on this crisis (Hoggett 2019, Weintrobe 2013). Meanwhile, social movements have risen up in response to the lack of action, in order to awaken a rapid transformation and avert large scale catastrophe (Klein 2019).

This research focuses on Extinction Rebellion (XR) and some of its key activists, in order to analyse the role of prefiguration in the climate emergency context. It is necessary to give an overview of this movement, and to bring together the scarce literature on its organising and action. XR emerged as a global ecological movement in 2018, taking direct action through mass civil disobedience in order to challenge the political and economic powers that continue with business as usual at the expense of all of our futures (Extinction Rebellion 2019). The movement takes an openly prefigurative approach through three of its core principles: (i) non-

hierarchical organisation, (ii) nonviolence and (iii) embodiment of a regenerative culture. These principles are thus reflected both in organisational structure and in direct actions (Shah 2019).

XR claims to be a 'self-organising system', whereby anyone can take action in the name of XR as long as they adhere to the 10 values (Westwell and Bunting 2020). This non-hierarchical format is a prefiguration of the equal and empowered world that XR seeks to catalyse. Furthermore, the 10 values are rooted in ideas of prefiguration – focusing on nonviolent means for nonviolent ends and practice of a regenerative culture, which will be expanded upon in the research findings. In actions this prefiguration is also visible; street style 'people's assemblies' are used to make collective decisions on the organisation of occupation sites and types of actions. The movement's claim is that these choices are not only the moral imperative, but also the strategic logic for true system change. Based on research by Chenoweth and Stephan (2008), the movement refers to the empirical evidence that nonviolent movements are at least twice as likely to succeed. Furthermore, nonviolent movements are less likely to alienate the public, and are more effective at mobilisation. Decentralised organisation compounds this strength, as it allows local groups and individuals to be autonomous and recruit, act and communicate the movement message, often in the most applicable local context, rather than waiting for instruction from distant leaders through a hierarchical system. These points aim to address the critiques of prefiguration, that it lacks efficacy and impact on real structural changes. XR's direct approach, nonviolence, and decentralised organisation can be considered as strengths to its strategy and efficacy, rather than trade-offs (Shah 2019). This fertile intersection between strategic and moral prefiguration will be explored further throughout the research.

### 3. Methodology

The research takes an interpretivist, social constructivist position in its methodological approach, highlighting the subjectivity in each person's interpretation of meaning and reality. The epistemology examined is explicitly decolonial, exploring the process of collective prefiguration which exist before and beyond colonial thought. The ontological approach is rooted in Bloch's 'ontology of becoming' (Bloch 1986), which will be explored more in the findings section. The study involved qualitative research based on primary data using the tools of two focus groups (n=6) and 8 interviews, with a total of 20 participants. Purposive sampling was used to recruit key organisers in the XR movement. The participants were selected and contacted individually through the Extinction Rebellion network (using Signal messenger app). A drawback to this largely purposive sample is the inevitable potential for researcher bias in selection (Bryman 2016). Although it is impossible to avoid this in the context of the research and the difficulty in recruitment during the COVID-19 pandemic, there were some mitigative strategies taken, for example: participants were selected to reflect different races, gender and backgrounds in order to maximise representativeness (Silverman 2013). This

reflected in the group discussions and interviews, yielding an array of positions, identities and experiences around the topic of prefigurative activism, and this allowed for flowing and varied discussions.

The great strength of focus groups became clear in the first discussion, where participants were able to engage with each other's propositions and experiences. Barbour (2007) suggests that focus groups allow for this collective expression to emerge that is not possible in individual interviews, encouraging participants to bounce off each other and explore both shared and differing feelings. In this way, the group expression can enhance and stimulate individual expression. However, this has the potential drawback of exaggerating conformity, if participants feel pressure to align with the group view, for example on opinions around nonviolence. It is also possible that several voices, or even one voice dominates a focus group, and the findings are therefore skewed towards an unrepresentative minority of our sample (Bloor 2001). To mitigate for these biases and internal reliability issues, some questions were directed as an open floor discussion and others took the format of a go-round the table so that everyone had an opportunity to voice their perspective.

The benefit of combining these focus groups with individual interviews was that these 1-1 dialogues allowed for a deeper, more considered and personal exploration into such a complex topic. It was also noted that some participants in the focus group expressed discomfort at admitting to their views on nonviolence for example, as this touches upon personal ethics and beliefs. In the interviews, participants were perceptibly less constrained to voice controversial positions. The semi-structured nature of both the focus group and interviews allowed participants greater "freedom to digress" (Lune & Berg, 2017, p.69) whilst also balancing this with some structure and facilitation. Mixed methods such as this give greater validity and confidence in the research findings (Bryman 2012). Due to the nature of the research topic and its interconnections of personal, political and collective, the combination of group and individual dialogues was appropriate and gleaned a diversity of rich themes (Morse 2009)

Conducting a thematic analysis, using Clarke and Braun's (p.1949, 2014) framework for "theoretical, latent and critical realist" approaches allowed for an open analysis of codes and categories without being unrealistic or exaggerated in the jump to findings. Codes were developed according to a pre-ordained research question, and thus the approach was theoretical and "analyst-driven" (p.84). The analysis was latent and "interpretive", as I identified underlying influences that shaped our participants responses (p.84). Finally, opting for a 'critical realist' epistemological approach allowed for the benefits of both 'realism' and 'constructionism' - acknowledging how individuals create meanings of their own experiences whilst contextualising this in "broader social reality" (p.81). This allowed for a nuanced juxtaposition of psychological explanations nested within a wider sociological context, which is essential to psycho-social approaches to social change research (Clarke and Hoggett 2009

### Positionality and reflexivity

Throughout the research I was aware of my own positionality and bias in the investigative process. As an activist involved with XR, I have gained a deep understanding of the movement's dynamics, its emotions and its people. I have been arrested for non-violent direct action and have a high emotional stake in the movement. During these discussions, I noticed my dual position as a researcher and an activist (Randall 2013). One aim of this paper is to broaden the definition of activism, and it is hoped that this form of engaged, active research provokes a deepening in the activist-researcher relationship, encouraging social scientists to be activists and activists to be social scientists. Through this research, the inseparable nature of both 'fields' has become clear; socially disengaged research and sociologically naïve activism are equally problematic (Hoggett 2019). I reflect on my positionality in the research as a bias to be keenly aware of but also as a strength to be considered in light of the depth and practicality of the study. The discussions and findings have already been in dialogue with organising groups in XR that will use the potential new understandings to evolve the movement and its prefiguration.

### Ethics

The consideration of ethics in this study is important both in the sensitive nature of the topic (Lee 1993) itself and the sensitive nature of the context that the research is applied – amidst the covid-19 pandemic. The latter sensitivity was accounted for using online meeting technology (Zoom, Microsoft teams) and interactive discussion forums for participants (such as on Whatsapp, Facebook). The sensitivity of climate change has been considered deeply due to the strong feelings of grief, anxiety and despair amongst ecological activists (Lertzmann 2015, Weintrobe 2013, Hoggett 2019). There is thus potential for psychological distress and triggering of trauma in this research. To mitigate for this, the research has been open about its sensitive topic from the sampling stage, to avoid recruitment of participants who are psychologically unstable or in a strong state of eco-anxiety or depression (see appendix 1 and 2). The sensitivity of the topic is also considered throughout the research. Careful facilitation is required in such a study, in creation and maintenance of a safe sharing space. However, this transparency of research topic also reflects a limitation to the reliability of the study; the topic of prefiguration and hope is likely to attract more optimistic activists, which could sway the research outcomes towards support of prefiguration in the movement.

## 4. Findings and Discussion

This section explores the core chapters of this research process, delving into the key themes and undercurrents of the study. The five themes are distinct but interconnected, bound together by the collective experiences of activists in the Extinction Rebellion movement but also permeating into other related ecological movements and sociologies. The themes elucidate the broad, nuanced and diverse role of prefiguration in response to the urgency of

the climate crisis (theme 1). This is presented as a myriad of prefigurations (theme 2) which vary temporally and spatially (theme 5) within the movement, hinging upon activist identities (theme 3), psychosocial processes and hope embodiment (theme 4). Figure 1 summarises these themes and figure 2 outlines their interconnection within the wider spheres of research scope.

Figure 1: Summary of themes

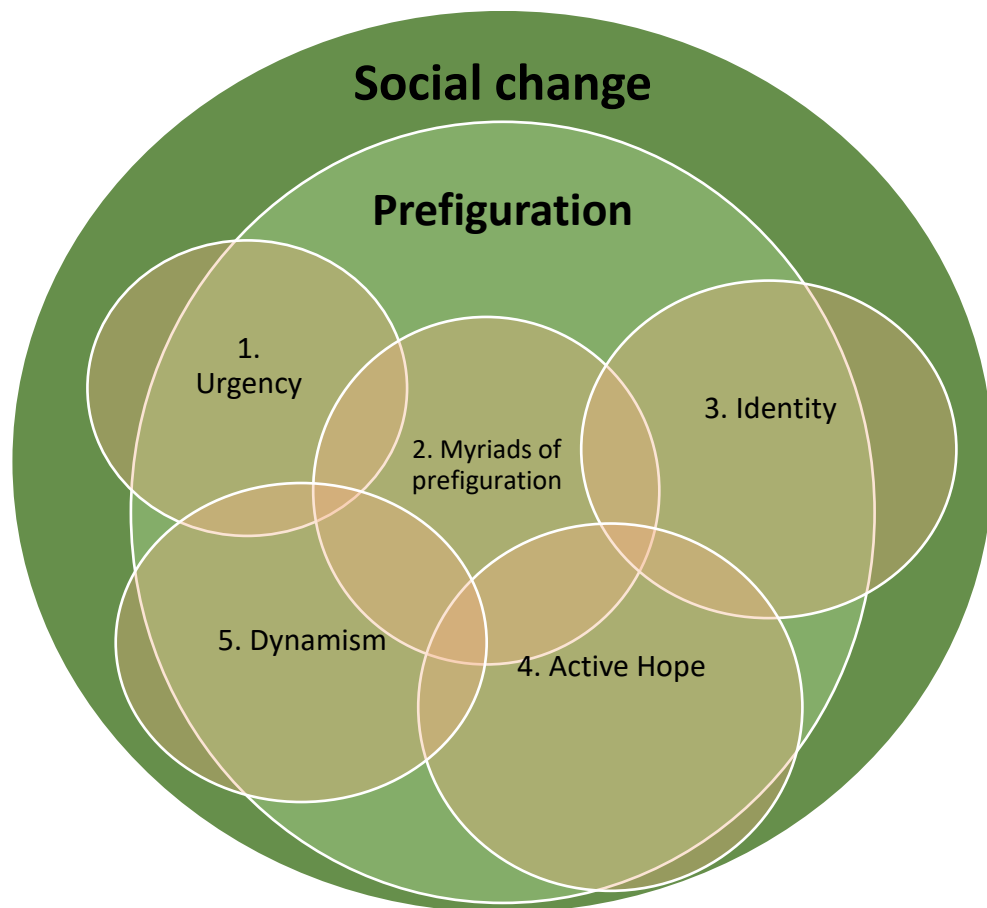
Theme	Description/ relevance
Urgency	Paradoxical need for prefiguration despite perception of it as a slower approach in the context of climate emergency.
Myriads of prefiguration	Prefiguration manifests in numerous and diverse ways within a single movement.
Identity	How age and cultural identity and their intersections relate to prefiguration.
Active Hope	Beyond the dualism of propositional vs oppositional action, there is an active hope that confronts the existing paradigm <i>whilst</i> creating the new one.
Dynamism	The role of prefiguration is dynamic throughout a movement's cycle in time and across movements spaces (spatial dynamism).

#### 4.1 Urgency

The first theme to emerge became obvious in the early stages of discussion with six movement leaders. A critical realist voice on prefiguration provided a useful lever to stimulate rich discussion throughout the first focus group, and she began with the provocative statement: “perhaps we don’t have time to do this exactly as we would wish to” (Anna). This points to the urgency of the ecological crisis, outlined by Bonneuil and Fressoz (2016); we are at such a late stage and already breaching environmental tipping points beyond repair, pushing planetary boundaries to the extreme. The perspective of instrumental urgency was prevalent in the discussions with XR activists. A counter-narrative also emerged, responding with the conviction that “we cannot rush the emergency” and “if we don’t prefigure, we fail” (Don). Reconciling these two perspectives became a thread to anchor the research and stimulate debate. The first perspective originates in the instrumentalist approach from the literature review (Eldridge 1998), suggesting that prefiguration is not necessarily essential for the social change, even at times inhibitory to the urgency of action. The second perspective, however, framed prefiguration as a strategic tool and core to the movement success, regardless of the urgency. This approach opted for a wider lens of social change and transformation, acknowledging that “rushing the emergency would not ultimately solve the problem” (Marcus). Other research into prefigurative social movement has rarely alluded to this ‘deadline effect.’ And yet it is clear that there is a tension for many activists in the

adoption of idealistic approaches, which might take longer, in the context of a climate emergency rapidly spiralling out of control (Hoggett 2019).

Figure 2: Relationships and scope of themes



One example from the discussion related to ways of organising, and the extent to which there is enough time to develop and embody the decentralised leadership structures. This particular aspect of XR's prefiguration was a node of discussion, providing a diversity of positions; many were willing to concede that this element of the prefigurative approach was at times "tedious and slow" (Alan). Others pointed to the richness of the movement that rippled from it – the collective empowerment that allowed for co-creative emergence and complex multi-layered actions where each contributor could make decisions and implement creative ideas (Macnamara and Storch 2019). A key finding from this is that the 'deadline effect' adds a nuance to movement strategy and invites a non-dogmatic approach to certain issues, such as decentralisation. Whilst activists acknowledged the need for the experimentation pillar of prefiguration, it must be reconciled with a level of discipline – direct, efficient organising of actions to challenge power which may require some compromise on values, in the context of



limited time.

For many activists the sense of urgency forces a more pragmatic, instrumental and compromised approach to autonomy. Whilst every social issue is critical and typically time-bound, it appears that the ecological emergency at this stage is particularly pressing (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016), adding a great challenge to activists that aim to simultaneously create the new systems/models whilst dismantling the destructive structures that allowed the crisis to get to this critical point. The key finding from this theme is that urgency invited a balance between experimentation and efficacy. One participant pointed out that this doesn't mean decentralised organising is necessarily slower – but it is slower at the moment and in this context because “we are learning as we go” (Sanjay). The luxury of slow learning and experimentation is one not necessarily afforded to all activist circles, and sometimes a compromise is required in the face of the deadline effect. This must be reconciled with the prefigurative ideal of non-instrumentalism, which many activists hold as an inflexible dogma. Whilst the integrity of non-instrumentalism is appraised in social movement history (e.g. Civil rights movement, Indian independence), it can also be idealised, dogmatised and not reflective of the compromises these social movements made in order to affect rapid change (Soborski 2018). This theme points to both a critique and an opportunity for prefiguration; inviting its praxis to evolve not as dogma but a flexible tool to leverage system transformations in the face of a visceral deadline such as ecological collapse.

#### **4.2 Myriads of Prefiguration**

This second theme elucidates further complexity as to the role of prefiguration in social-ecological movements. This finding departs from Breines' (1980) narrow approach to prefiguration based purely on organisational structure and invites a broader understanding more similar to Raekstad and Gradin's conceptualisation of the term (2020). Opting for a prefigurative approach is not a single-dimensional application to the canvas of organisation, but a myriad of approaches, whereby prefiguration can be applied in different ways to the multiple elements of a movement. In discussions with XR activists, the key elements were: (i) Nonviolence, (ii) decentralisation, (iii) regenerative culture and (iv) actions. Only one of these nodes of prefiguration relates directly to Breines' organisational principle, emphasising the diversification of prefigurative praxis since the term's conception. In the movement, prefiguration is not applied equally/consistently to all of these concepts and thus the scope for modelling the future is variable across a spectrum. This infers that the role of prefiguration even within a single movement is heterogenous, flexible and dynamic (Yates 2020).

In XR, prefiguration has been applied most rigorously to the practice and culture of (i) nonviolence within the movements approach, actions and participation. This element, within the myriads of prefiguration, attracts least flexibility and compromise. The vast majority of activists interviewed held a strong belief that a prefigurative approach is essential in this realm; “a nonviolent society will not be successfully birthed from a violent movement”

(Doug). The means and ends must therefore align; dropping this value would not increase the morality or the strategic success of the movement. This points to viewing prefiguration's role in the ecological movement as central, non-negotiable and essential. However, the complexity emerges later in discussion and particularly in the individual interviews, which perhaps allowed for more controversial, cynical and critical realist statements to be voiced (Bryman 2012). Several participants voiced that whilst nonviolence has been critical to XRs success, mobilisation and action effectiveness, they would also be willing to join a violent movement for urgent change if it was powerful enough to halt the greater violence of the exploitative global system of anthropocentrism. It is interesting to note that even the strongest element of prefiguration within the movement is not an absolute – it can be said that there is some level of accepted compromise for some activists: “at times, given the scale and speed of destruction in the world, and the systemic violence towards all minorities... I do actually question the nonviolence principle” (Ann). Whilst this perspective points to a critical realist nuance within the role of prefiguration and nonviolence, it must be emphasised that the overall finding on this sub-theme is that prefiguring a nonviolent society was perceived as central to almost all XR activists interviewed.

Moving on to other elements in this myriad of prefigurations, the role of (ii) decentralisation appears to be more amenable to compromise for activist participants. Prefiguring an autonomous and empowered society of decentralised affinity groups is a core principle of Extinction Rebellion and provides a driving force of movement organisation and mobilisation strategy (XR 2019). However, this value has confronted challenges in practice, and presents a greater divergence of “compromisability” (Antonin) within activists. Most participants alluded to the challenges of maintaining a fully decentralised, leaderless movements, surrounded by a paradigm of hierarchy, efficiency and centralised decision-making. This points to a key critique of prefiguration – sometimes it is such a struggle against a tide that the very struggle can sap the energies of activists and render them ineffective to even tweak the status quo (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). It's important to note a research limitation here, in that the sample group tended to be highly involved and leaders in the movement, thus their perceptions of decentralisation are biased to their own positionality. The strengths of XR's decentralised approach were acknowledged in their “mobilising strategy web” (Don), in the collective power of “thousands of autonomous affinity groups” (8-12 people self-organising actions in the name of XR), and in the “inclusivity and diversity that this approach enables” (Livi). This element of the prefigurative approach is thus observed as a desirable and useful tool within the movement, but not without nuanced compromises. The urgency theme penetrates this analysis, as decentralised, participatory decision making is generally acknowledged as slower, complex and process orientated (rather than outcome focused; Eldridge 1998). This presents challenges for a movement that aims to effect rapid change, with a set of objectives and a need to make quick decisions, especially during illegal direct actions. Cornell (2011) also highlights the practical limits of dogmatic consensus-based approaches through the case of Movement for a New Society. Participants in XR clearly

expressed the acceptance to compromise on the anarchic ideal in order to achieve the rapid social changes required.

Thirdly, the discourse of (iii) regenerative culture (Wahl 2016) has become an accidental pillar to this research, and has emerged as a concept synonymous with prefiguration, yet with a stylised tone in the ecological movement. Regenerative culture is said to be “the mycelium that binds together and sustains the movement” (Don, referring to mycelium - the fungal substrate that connects all of biological life). There is a visioning element to this, whereby the broad vision for XR is for a regenerative culture where humanity is part of the regeneration of life within a symbiotic Earth community (Wahl 2016; Eisenstein 2011). This, according to Wright’s principles of envisioning utopia (2013) is an interstitial discourse and a guiding narrative for the shift towards transformative social change. It is also prefigurative in the creation of alternatives and experimentation that it necessitates – visible in the “kindness and welcoming nature of XR meetings” (Livi), in the focus on “reflexive activism” (Don) and the centrality of “balanced well-being” (Xavier) to avoid activism burnout. This insight departs from the literature that caricatures and stereotypes a hardened, reactionary and relentless activist (Ojala 2012; Diani and Della Porta 1998). The role of prefiguration in regard to regenerative culture is expressed as a core tenet of the movement, but evidently more important for its internal facing side than its outward action. In other words, this element is crucial for personal prefiguration, allowing individual activists to remain inspired, nourished and sustained by their vision and practice of regeneration (Wahl 2016). Regenerative culture is thus certainly useful in the myriads of prefiguration but not generally regarded to be as core as nonviolence for example.

Underpinning these three elements lies a prefigurative approach to (iv) actions. The extent to which this is opted for within the movement is variable and contested. In the research, this boiled down to an active debate between propositional vs oppositional actions. One strong position, stated by Anna, is that “the prefigurative actions are nice to have. They probably have some sort of indirect bearing upon participation and mobilising.” Furthered by Alan: “It is not the free food or the street art that caused the government to declare a climate emergency – it was the physical occupations, economic disruption and the 1200 arrests.” This encapsulates a recurring voice in the research taken by an expressive group of participants, suggesting that prefigurative actions are not entirely appropriate for the movements mission. Other activists disagreed: “To me, prefiguration is everything” (Don). “Those very acts that offer an alternative means that change is possible – sowing the seed of alternatives in people’s minds is what got me involved and it is the only way I see to achieve transformational change” (Xavier). These myriads of prefiguration point to a much broader and more nuanced use of the tool than Breines outlines (1980). These first two themes serve to elucidate some of the limitations of prefiguration. Firstly, that sometimes a compromise with the existing structure is necessary in radical social movements in an urgent context. Secondly, that prefiguration can at times be insular and internalised, as with regenerative culture, without

strategic political analyses or impact-driven action. This is not necessarily a drawback of prefiguration, but it invites a platform for the tool to be used in diverse ways with a critical understanding of its role amongst other tools (Raekstad and Gradin 2020).

### 4.3 Identity

The role of identity in social movements is becoming its own field of enquiry in sociology, through the increase in identity-based movements combined with a deeper understanding of the linkages between personal and collective identity (Diani and Della Porta 1998). The role of identity can be explored through many lenses of age, class, gender, sexuality, race, culture and the intersectionality of these social categories (Crenshaw 1990). Deeper exploration of this is left to future research on the topic, but for the purpose of this dissertation, the age-related (Hall and Du Gay 2006) and cultural dimensions of identity in relevance to prefiguration will be briefly examined. Identities of resistance, of course, underpin any discussion of autonomy and social movements, but this is another space created for future research on the topic. More broadly, social identity is relevant here because every activist in the ecological movement sits within a cultural frame and speaks/acts from a reality tied to their identity (Kurtz 2003). This affects the perceived and practiced role of prefiguration within XR and the ecological movement as a whole. Whilst identity categories have blurred boundaries, and are rooted in social constructionism, there are emergent themes and trends where prefiguration is embodied and associated more strongly with certain social groups. In this research, women tended to favour a prefigurative approach more than men. Another example: different classes view the role of anti-capitalist, post-capitalist or apolitical prefigurations through different psychosocial lenses (Fisher 2019; Hoggett 2018). These are thesis fields for future research which have only been surfaced here, but the potential for a psychosocial (Holloway and Jefferson 2013) and identity-based understanding of prefiguration is clear, and one example will be explored to begin evidencing this.

### XR Youth & XR Elders

The research revealed that the appetite for prefiguration shifts with age. Younger participants appeared to be more supportive and enthused for certain aspects of prefiguration such as the role of experimentation with alternative economies, cultures and organisation. This was voiced by a participant who had witnessed this “age effect” (Sanjay, 19) in the meetings and actions of the movement. However, the research indicated that it is not a simple correlation of prefiguration and youth, but a bi-modal distribution with nuanced qualities at each modal data point. By this I mean that there is also a high appetite for prefiguration among elder participants, and yet their framing and approach to prefigurative activism is qualitatively different. My research included several participants involved with XR Youth (16-25) and several XR Elders (60+) - two branches of the movement. Whilst the youth perspective on prefigurative activism pivoted upon experimentation, revolutionary praxis and concrete utopia (Bloch 1986), the Elder approach took a broader view of prefigurative transformation more akin to Wrights ‘interstitial transformation’ (2013) and Wahl’s regenerative culture

(2016). This latter perspective noticed the long-term strategic praxis of prefiguration, underpinned by the thesis that true social change will only occur if the alternative paradigm is created so skilfully that it can “render the existing model obsolete” (to quote Buckminster Fuller, in Sieden 2011, p.358).

Movements and moments often create sociological spaces for systemic transformations (Wright 2013), but there are not always embodied alternatives sufficient to fill this space, resulting in a reproduction of the same paradigm – “business as usual”. This longer-term ‘Elder perspective’ of change is rooted in “decades of activism and experiencing ineffectual reformist changes” (Annie, 86). Between these voices of XR Youth and Elders lie a range of prefigurative approaches, but in general the research findings reveal a general dissonance with prefiguration among middle-aged participants (30-50). In these personal activist relationships to prefiguration, the concept had lost its power over the course of their years in activism and their “frustrations with forcing change”. It can be gleaned from these discussions that cynicism, frustration and anger became prominent feelings (Weintrobe 2013) in many activists alongside the diminishing role of prefiguration in their action. XR Youth and XR Elders, in general, had a different frame of perspective to situate the centrality of prefigurative activism, and thus it formed a more crucial (but stylised) tenet to their participation in the movement. Through the benefit of interactions possible in focus groups (Bryman 2012), XR youth and elders engaged in a fascinating discussion around the union of their nuanced approaches to prefiguration, noticing the merits of both and the potential to unify these experimental (Youth) and paradigmatic (Elder) prefigurations.

### Indigenous prefiguration

Cultural identities intersect with this agentic dimension of prefigurative capacity. The elder approach to prefiguration resonates with an indigenous approach, which presents an opportunity to broaden the discourse on prefiguration. When interviewing an activist who identified as indigenous, the potential for western-centric understanding of prefiguration became evident, and my own epistemic biases were challenged, recognising my own positionality and conditioning as an English white male researcher. I began this research assuming that prefiguration was a concept of the future, albeit modelled and ‘concretised’ (Bloch 1986) in the now. Discussions with indigenous activists allowed a deeper, richer re-framing of the concept and its potential for transformational social change. From an indigenous activist perspective, “this prefiguration concept is not so much about the future... but about how we frame reality in the now in a way that empowers us to co-create it collectively which includes the voices of our ancestors” (Kian). This seemingly abstract link to ancestors was initially challenging to grasp – but has now become central to my thesis conclusions. Prefiguring a future in the now without a grounding in the past is akin to a blind, unrooted activism. “Without our ancestors we are lost” (Raja). Today’s world is prefigured by our ancestors and reality does not begin in the now but in the whole of history. The starting point in our visions for the future and the value systems that underpin them is our lineage

(Korten 2007).

Prefiguration can be seen as a transitional discourse (or a bridge technology) in our deepening perspective of time beyond the western separation of past, present and future (Escobar 2018, 2020). Grasping this requires a non-linear perception of time, which quantum mechanics and post-Newtonian physics is revealing to be the reality (Capra and Luisi 2014). Linear perceptions of prefiguration are limited and western-centric, “swamped in dualism” (Kian). Prefiguration of the now and the not-yet has already begun and has never ceased – so its role in ecological activism is to continue not begin this work. Viewing time as cyclic or spiralling (Beck and Cowan on Spiral Dynamics 2014) is perhaps more useful for studying such complex social change. An interviewee (Raja) spoke of his “memories of the future” – an indigenous concept that communicates cycling of time. From this framing, we are able to prefigure and imagine an alternative because we already have a ‘memory’ of it, have already been there to an extent – not necessarily in this specific reality or lifetime (Beck and Cowan 2014). Again, this is a non-western concept that is challenging to grasp, and requires an openness to non-linearity and multi-dimensionality e.g. indigenous cultures participate in visioning circles where they enter a ‘dream world’ to “remember the future” (Raja) and let this vision guide their actions in the now. Whilst the concept is complex, and disregarded by many western scholars, it also provides a platform for future research and an opportunity to mature the concept of prefiguration to align with indigenous cosmologies. This positions prefiguration as a dynamic, underlying force that continually shapes multiple realities in the cycles of time through both visioning and ancestry, anchored in the unfolding now. This discussion points towards the potential for diverse ontologies of prefiguration beyond western-centric frames (Shiva 2005), resituating the praxis as a cosmos of possibilities linked through ancestral knowledge, vision and power (Dinerstein 2014).

#### 4.4 Active Hope

Building on this native ontological framing, the focus group discussion took an ‘indigenous turn’ when Xavier challenged others to go beyond dualism, suggesting that “propositional and oppositional actions are not separate trade-offs or choices, but connected tools” that must be unified for the urgent systemic transformation that the situation demands. From this approach, prefigurative action is integral for providing and modelling inspiring solutions, and yet in itself not sufficient – it must be skilfully combined with the necessary oppositional activism. This relates, on a psychosocial level (Hoggett 2019) to the necessity of combining grief and hope as drivers of oppositional and propositional actions – driving participants to voice both outrage at the violent systems of destruction, and to simultaneously enact their embodied hope for alternatives (Fisher 2019). Responding to this perspective, was a murmur of agreement in the second focus group, with a deepened discussion that framed propositional and oppositional actions as co-dependent and mutually synergetic for “successful and beautiful collective action” (Marcus). Livi then added the necessity of timing into this thesis; “the propositional actions must come in at a timely manner...”, whilst Doug

pointed to the importance of power forms: “my experience is that the oppositional actions have great power... but a different sort of power is visible when both types of actions come together like in creating a convivial community whilst road-blocking Waterloo Bridge.” This introduction of context, timing and power is highly relevant. It may be the element of timing and appropriateness that unifies the apparent polarity between oppositional and propositional – both are needed at different pivotal moments for change.

The distinction between power types in oppositional and propositional actions is key to understanding the nuanced role of effective prefiguration. Social movements and oppositional activism engage with a “power-to” whilst prefigurative movements may take this a step further and embody a “power-within” (Berger 2005) comparable to Gandhi’s concept of ‘truth force’ which expresses a moral power and a doing based on integrity rather than being purely orientated around outcome (Chenoweth and Stephan 2018). The role of integrity was touched upon in both focus groups, with Xavier expressing that the movement must be rooted in integrity for otherwise “we lose our souls, values and drives along the way, so become part of the problem”. This is particularly interesting for the concept of ‘beyond dualism’ – many participants pointed to a false polarity of moral/integrity and strategic aspects to the movement’s prefiguration. It was argued that the two do not exist in a dualism but are inseparable, and a moral approach (such as nonviolence) is also a strategic approach and more likely to result in true success and transformative change. This is supported by empirical research into social movements, for example Erica Chenoweth’s (2018) analysis of social movements since the 1950s. She discovered that those with a moral nonviolent approach were at least twice as likely to succeed in their aims, less likely to alienate the public and more inclusive (carrying greater mobilising force). This approach of moral and strategic necessity appears to underpin XR’s sociology of emergences and theory of change, with every XR induction, talk/training and action beginning with the principles and values that underpin the movement (of which nonviolence, regenerative culture, inclusivity and decentralisation are core). This points to a strong role of prefigurative hope in the movement, through the lens of both integrity and strategy, and a creative ‘propositional opposition’. It is at this fertile intersection of ‘power-to’ and ‘power within’ where a prefigurative movement is most effective.

Taking this theme of non-dualism and applying it to the ecological movement as a whole, it can be extrapolated that the role of prefiguration in this is most impactful and transformational when used in conjunction with both holding actions and ontological shifts. Joanna Macy in *Active Hope* (2012) refers to the three necessary pillars of the great turning: holding actions (such as the political direct action and civil disobedience of XR), transformation of common life (such as the cultural emergence concept in the Permaculture movement, Macnamara and Storch 2012) and shifts in perception and consciousness (such as the healing biotopes of Tamera Eco-village; Korten 2007). These examples given by research participants, point to three inter-related spheres of transformation – political, cultural and

spiritual. Macy argues, from a Buddhist perspective of non-duality, that all three are needed simultaneously in order to catalyse the great turning and facilitate the necessary shifts in response to an urgent ecological crisis. According to Macy (2016) and Solnit (2010), the unifying energy between these forces is an 'active hope.' There is another false dualism to explore in this concept, alluded to by Annie as the "constant swings between hope and despair... each driving and igniting different forces within me but somehow contributing to the same work." This form of hope involves engaging with the grief of the situation, and the crisis at hand, whilst acknowledging the uncertainty of the future – it is this uncertainty that provides possibility and thus the necessity for action to work towards creating a more beautiful world (Eisenstein 2011; Solnit 2010). The concept of active hope invites a matured role of prefiguration that combines the necessary oppositional with the propositional spheres of action in order to leverage social change.

#### 4.5 Dynamism

This section unpicks the fluid nature of prefiguration both temporally and spatially. Firstly, the role of prefiguration is dynamic even within a single movement. Secondly, its role is diverse and contested in different action frames within the environmental movement as a whole (Kurtz 2003). Rather than seeing prefiguration as a central vs non-central role in a given movement, the reality is fluid: its role pulses and shifts. This sub-theme of dynamism is crucial to understanding the flowing complexity of prefigurative activism within ecological movements. It became clear in discussions that the centrality of prefiguration has waxed and waned over time, even in the short years since XR's conception. Don alluded to the effort to "operationalise XR" in 2019-2020. This saw a shift on the idealism-pragmatism spectrum towards the latter end, in attempt to "streamline the movement towards its goals". This reflects a significant turn towards instrumentalism and away from the means-ends equivalence of prefiguration (Dinerstein 2014). Some participants agreed in the necessity of this shift, albeit wanting to retain an aspect of prefiguration and idealism. Others argued that this compromise weakens movement integrity and diminishes its internal power to affect interstitial transformations (Wright 2013). The dynamic interplay between these positions in the movement has allowed for a rich dialogue both in this research and in the movement itself. In the last 12 months, XR has fluctuated in a relative "return movement" towards prefiguration. Through its ability to shift approaches, this highlights a strength of the movement's core principle of "reflecting and learning as an experimental movement" (Sammy) – which aligns with the literature on the crucial role of experimentation in prefiguration (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). The continual reflection and shift in approach allows for prefiguration to weave in and out of the movements core when the context and timing is most appropriate for effective activism. Once again, this highlights that prefiguration must not become a dogma if it is to be an effective movement tool.

This theme of dynamic shift in movement focus and structure is situated amongst an



abundance of literature on movement life cycles (Snow and Benford 1992). What is new here is the emphasis on how the magnitude of prefiguration shifts over time, and how this can be usefully applied as a frame for movement life cycle analysis. Taking Erikson's theory of life cycles (1994), the 'early childhood' phase of the movement can be viewed as strong in prefigurative idealism. At the adulthood phase when the movement becomes established/matured, there is a compromised and critical approach to these experimental ideals and a movement can become institutionalised and operationalised at this stage. In the 'elder phase' of a movement life cycle, there can be a return movement, revisiting prefigurative ideals with greater nuance and understanding of transformational change. This general cycle was evident in the voices of XR Youth and XR Elders representing their respective agentic energies within the movement (albeit with exceptions to this categorisation). The life cycle pattern also reflected in XR's shifts over time, in the attempt to "operationalise XR" and the "return movement towards prefiguration and regenerative culture" (Don). There is thus a nuanced role of prefiguration at different times of a movement life cycle, as evidenced in XR's dynamic shifts. Each phase of the cycle requires a specific level (dose) of prefiguration to be an effective and moral strategy, but the magnitude and centrality of this role is not a panacea, and it can shift in prominence for both individuals and movements over time.

Prefiguration is also dynamic across movement spaces, even within the same activist networks and movement ideologies. This sub-theme of spatial dynamism relates to the broader picture of environmental activism and the stylised role that prefiguration can take within the diversity of movement ecologies. Of the participants, over half were active in multiple social movements (supporting Diani and Della Porta's (1998) thesis of movements' overlapping networks). Most commonly, an association with Transition Towns and the Permaculture movement were prevalent. This is highly interesting for the research, as these movements are primarily about creating the alternatives, building the new paradigm in the shell of the old and embodying prefiguration in a concrete utopian way (Bloch 1986; Hopkins 2019). In this critical socio-ecological moment when multiple crises are converging (Bonneuil and Fressoz 2016), there is and must be a spectrum of movements that embody the multiplicity of roles required of us (Korten 2007). Each of these roles and movements place different emphasis on prefiguration in their approach and strategy. XR has been described as "sounding the alarm bell" and "speaking truth to power" (Sanjay) through direct action and disruption of business-as-usual (XR 2019). Other movements, such as the Transition Towns, the permaculture movement and Global Ecovillage Network provide a different but equally necessary archetype for catalysing change, rooted in the active creation of alternatives (Hopkins 2019; Eisenstein 2011). Participants viewed their participation in these movements as a key outlet for their prefiguration, and engagement with "propositional activism" (Anna).

Permaculture, for example, believes in creating the latent systems for a resilient culture – establishing the necessary models for a regenerative human presence on Earth (Mollison and Holmgren 1978). Permaculture design ethics are applied to ecological agriculture, natural

building, social systems and culture in order to birth the new society in the shell of the old (Wahl 2016). Transition towns also reveals a crucial element of prefiguration within the wider ecological movement. This community level approach promotes “local living economies” (Shiva 2005, p.72), sustainable food production, renewable energy projects, sustainable transport and local empowerment to enact these solutions together (Hopkins 2019). Participants spoke of their experiences in these movements as the “other side to the coin” (Sammy) of their activism in XR. Relating back to the emotive level of holding grief and hope through action (Macy and Johnstone 2012), this points to the finding that XR does not, and does not need to embody prefiguration perfectly – for it is a concept dynamic in space and operates with more visceral force in its partner movements, albeit often through the same actors. The magnitude of prefiguration is dynamic across movement spaces, and when its role is diminished in one movement this can be balanced by its prevalence in another (e.g. permaculture), if the movements are willing to work together for system change.

### The Personal is Political

Prefiguration is also dynamic between micro and macro contexts. The juxtaposition of personal and political scales is a central tenet of prefiguration (Yates 2020) and it is fascinating that this linkage revealed itself so starkly in the research – most participants appeared to have an understanding of personal prefiguration in relation to their collective political action, alluding to “the deconstruction of violence in my own mind and daily interactions is like the same work I do in XR deconstructing the violent political system” (Annie). This is essentially a psychosocial perspective, and in this case links the personal emotions of activists to the wider political and sociological work of change (Hoggett 2019). Participants alluded to feelings of hope driving their propositional activism, and feelings of grief and anger also propelling their involvement with XR.

## 5. Conclusion

It is this aspect of prefiguration, the emotive personal-political union, that underpins much of this research. Activists in this study all have personal vision and hopes/fears for the future. Each engages in a personal prefiguration with their particular approach within the movement – evident in the differing focuses on regenerative culture, nonviolence and leadership. “The movement means different things to different people” (Xavier). And thus, the role of prefiguration in the movement must account for this complexity somehow – that personal prefiguration feeds into the aggregate collective and vice-versa. The collective prefiguration of XR and other movements feeds into the personal visions, hope and empowerment of activists – “I get my strength from my involvement in the group...” (Alan); “it’s been an empowering experience and given me confidence” (Livi). Furthermore, the role of the collective imaginary (Hopkins 2019; Fisher 2019) and group visioning is central to the movement’s mobilisation and success: “I also feel like with XR I can get behind a vision that’s bigger than me, and I think that’s why I stay involved and give all my energy to this... in hope for a better world for my children...” (Sue). Both XR and the permaculture movement have a

visioning group, whose mandate is to envision and hold the reality of a more beautiful world, whilst knowing that the vision is experimental, evolving and co-dependent with the unfolding reality (Korten 2007). The role of prefiguration in the spectrum of ecological movements reflects this dynamism in space, time and scales which go beyond personal and political dualism.

Whilst previous research on prefiguration has focused on the anti-capitalist and autonomous pillars of social movements, there has been a dearth of analysis into the applications of prefiguration in the context of climate change and the ecological movement (Raekstad and Gradin 2020). This research has aimed to begin this particular conversation, and has already prompted wider discussion within XR as to the role of prefigurative activism in their movement. Prefiguration is not just about creating concrete utopia's and alternatives to capitalism in pockets of resistance, but rather it's framing can be widened if defined as a conception of reality that overlaps with indigenous cosmologies, co-creation of alternatives and direct action. Furthermore, the limits and challenges of this 'propositional-oppositional' approach require greater scrutiny, for a truly prefigurative praxis to emerge. This has already begun, in the translatory learning process between historical prefigurative movements, from Movement for a New Society in the US, to Latin American autonomous organising, to the Rojavan revolution in Syria. It is hoped that the research has furthered this learning process, by emphasising the nuances amidst a myriad of prefigurations, which are dynamic across movement cycles and spaces. Achieving the delicate balance between adversarial and exemplary social action is the critical challenge of 21st century social movements, in order to enact the systemic change required to address multiple converging and urgent crises.

## References

Barbour, R., 2007. *Doing Focus Groups*. London: Sage.

Beck, D.E. and Cowan, C.C., 2014. *Spiral dynamics: Mastering values, leadership and change*. John Wiley & Sons.

Bendell, J., 2018. Deep adaptation: a map for navigating climate tragedy. *Institute for Leadership and Sustainability*, Volume 2. University of Cumbria, UK.

Berger, B.K., 2005. Power over, power with, and power to relations: Critical reflections on public relations, the dominant coalition, and activism. *Journal of Public Relations Research*, 17(1), pp.5-28.

Bloor, M. ed., 2001. *Focus groups in social research*. London: Sage.

Bonneuil, C., and Fressoz, J., 2016. *The shock of the Anthropocene: the earth, history and us*. London: Verso.

Bryman, A., 2016. *Social Research Methods, 5th ed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Bloch, E., 1986. *The Principle of Hope*, Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press

Boggs, C. 1977. Marxism, Prefigurative Communism, and the Problem of Workers' Control. *Radical America* 11 (November), 100; cf. Boggs Jr., Carl. Revolutionary Process, Political Strategy, and the Dilemma of Power. *Theory & Society* 4, No. 3 (Fall), 359-93.

Breines, W., 1980. The New Left and Michele's 'Iron Law' Social Problems. *Community and Organisation*, 27(4), pp.419-29.

Bryman, A., 2016. *Social Research Methods, 5th ed*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Capra, F. and Luisi, P.L., 2014. *The systems view of life: A unifying vision*. Cambridge University Press.

Carson, R., 1962. *Silent Spring*. Greenwich, Connecticut.

Chatterton, P. and Pickerill, J., 2010. Everyday activism and transitions towards post-capitalist worlds. *Transactions of the institute of British Geographers*, 35(4), pp.475-490.

Chenoweth, E., and Stephan, M.J., 2008. Why civil resistance works: The strategic logic of nonviolent conflict. *International security*, 33(1), pp.7-44.

Clarke, V. and Braun, V., 2014. Thematic analysis. In *Encyclopedia of critical psychology* (pp. 1947-1952). Springer, New York, NY.

Clarke, S., and Hoggett, P., (Eds.) 2009. *Researching beneath the surface: Psychosocial research methods in practice*. London: Karnac.

Cornell, A., 2011. *Oppose and propose!: Lessons from Movement for a New Society* (Vol. 2). AK Press.

Crenshaw, K., 1990. Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. *Stan. L. Rev.*, 43, p.1241.

Diani, M. and Della Porta, D., 1998. *Social movements: An introduction*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell.

Dinerstein, A.C. and Deneulin, S. 2012. 'Hope Movements: Naming Mobilization in a Post-Development World', *Development and Change*, 43(2): 585–602.

Dinerstein, A.C. 2016. Denaturalising Society: Concrete Utopia and the Prefigurative Critique

of Political Economy, in A. C. Dinerstein (ed.), *Social Sciences for An- Other Politics: Women Theorising without Parachutes*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan: 49-64

Dinerstein, A. 2014. *The Politics of autonomy in Latin America: The art of organising hope*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Eisenstein, C., 2011. *Sacred economics: Money, gift, and society in the age of transition*. California: North Atlantic Books.

Eldridge, M., 1998. *Transforming experience: John Dewey's cultural instrumentalism*. Vanderbilt University Press.

Erikson, E.H., 1994. *Identity and the life cycle*. WW Norton & Company.

Escobar, A., 2018. *The making of social movements in Latin America: Identity, strategy, and democracy*. Routledge.

Escobar, A., 2020. *Pluriversal politics. The real and the Possible*. Duke University Press,

Extinction Rebellion, 2019. *This is not a drill: An Extinction Rebellion handbook*. Penguin UK.

Federici, V., 2015. The rise of Rojava: Kurdish autonomy in the Syrian conflict. *SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 35(2), pp.81-90.

Fisher, A., 2019. Ecopsychology as decolonial praxis. *Ecopsychology*, 11(3), pp.145-155.

Gibson-Graham, J. K. 2006. *A postcapitalist politics*: Minneapolis. Minnesota Press.

Hall, S. and Du Gay, P. eds., 2006. *Questions of cultural identity* (pp. pp-273). Crane Resource Centre.

Holloway, J. 2002: *Change the world without taking power*. London: Pluto.

Holloway, W., and Jefferson, T., 2013. *Doing qualitative research differently: a psychosocial approach*. London: Sage.

Hopkins, R., 2019. *From what is to what if: Unleashing the power of imagination to create the future we want*. Chelsea Green Publishing.

Hoggett, P., 2013. Climate change in a perverse culture. In S.Weintrobe (ed.), *Engaging with climate change*. London: Routledge.

Hoggett, P., 2019. *Climate Psychology: on indifference to disaster*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing.

Jackson, T., 2017. *Prosperity without growth: foundations for the economy of tomorrow*. Second edition. Abingdon: Routledge.

Kallis, G., and Hickel, J. 2020. Is green growth possible?. *New political economy*, 25(4), pp.469-486.

Klein, N., 2019. *On Fire: The Burning Case for a Green New Deal*. London: Penguin.

Korten, D.C., 2007. *The great turning: From empire to earth community*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Kurtz, H.E., 2003. Scale frames and counter-scale frames: constructing the problem of environmental injustice. *Political geography*, 22(8), pp.887-916.

Lee, R. 1993. *Doing Research on Sensitive Topics*. London: Sage.

Lertzman, A., 2015. *Environmental Melancholia: Psychoanalytic dimensions of engagement*. London: Routledge.

Lune, H. and Berg, B.L., 2017. *Qualitative research methods for the social sciences*. Pearson.

Macy, J. and Johnstone, C., 2012. *Active hope: How to face the mess we're in without going crazy*. San Francisco: New World Library.

Macnamara, L. and Storch, R., 2012. People and permaculture. *East Meon: Permanent Publications*.

Maeckelbergh, M., 2011. Doing is believing: Prefiguration as strategic practice in the alterglobalization movement. *Social Movement Studies*, 10(01), pp.1-20.

McGrath, A.E., 2016. *Christian theology: An introduction*. John Wiley & Sons.

Mead, M., Sieben, A. and Straub, J., 1973. *Coming of age in Samoa*. New York: Penguin.

Mollison, B. and Holmgren, D., 1978. *Permaculture*. Lesmurdie Progress Association.

Monbiot, G., 2017. *Out of the wreckage: A new politics for an age of crisis*. London: Verso Books.

Morse, J.M., 2012. The implications of interview type and structure in mixed-method designs. *The SAGE handbook of interview research: The complexity of the craft*, pp.193-204.

Naess, A., 1973. The shallow and the deep, long-range ecology movement. A summary. *Inquiry*, 16(1-4), pp.95-100.

Ojala, M., 2012. Hope and climate change: The importance of hope for environmental engagement among young people. *Environmental Education Research*, 18(5), pp.625-642.

Prügl, E., 1999. *The global construction of gender: Home-based work in the political economy*

*of the 20th century*. Columbia University Press.

Raekstad, P., 2018. Revolutionary practice and prefigurative politics: A clarification and defense. *Constellations*, 25(3), pp.359-372.

Raekstad, P. and Gradin, S.S., 2020. *Prefigurative Politics: Building Tomorrow Today*. John Wiley & Sons.

Randall, R., 2013. Great expectations: the psychodynamics of ecological debt. In S.Weintrobe (eds.), *Engaging with climate change*. London: Routledge.

Rockström, et al. 2009. A safe operating space for humanity. *nature*, 461(7263), pp.472-475.

Shah, D., 2019. Extinction Rebellion: radical or rational?. *British Journal of General Practice*, 69(684), pp.345-345.

Shiva, V., 2005. *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability and peace*. Zed Books.

Sieden, S.L., 2011. A Fuller View - Buckminster Fuller's Vision of Hope and Abundance for all. London: Divine Arts Media.

Silverman, D., 2013. *Doing Qualitative Research: a practical handbook, 4th ed*. London: Sage.

Sitrin, M., 2016. Rethinking social movements with societies in movement. In *Social Sciences for an Other Politics* (pp. 135-149). Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.

Snow, D.A. and Benford, R.D., 1992. Master frames and cycles of protest. *Frontiers in social movement theory*, 133, p.155.

Soborski, R., 2018. *Ideology and the Future of Progressive Social Movements*. Rowman & Littlefield.

Solnit, R., 2010. *A paradise built in hell: The extraordinary communities that arise in disaster*. Penguin.

Solnit, R., 2016. *Hope in the dark: Untold histories, wild possibilities*. Haymarket Books.

UN IPCC, 2018. *Global Warming of 1.5°C. An IPCC Special Report on the impacts of global warming of 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels and related global greenhouse gas emission pathways, in the context of strengthening the global response to the threat of climate change, sustainable development, and efforts to eradicate poverty*. In Press.

Wahl, D. C., 2016. *Designing regenerative cultures*. Portland, OR: Triarchy Press.

Westwell, E. and Bunting, J., 2020. The regenerative culture of Extinction Rebellion: self-care, people care, planet care. *Environmental Politics*, 29(3), pp.546-551.

Weintrobe, S. ed., 2013. *Engaging with climate change: Psychoanalytic and interdisciplinary perspectives*. Vancouver: Routledge.

Wright, E.O., 2013. Transforming capitalism through real utopias. *Irish Journal of Sociology*, 21(2), pp.6-40.

Yates, L., 2015. Rethinking prefiguration: Alternatives, micropolitics and goals in social movements. *Social Movement Studies*, 14(1), pp.1-21.

Yates, L., 2020. Prefigurative Politics and Social Movement Strategy: The Roles of Prefiguration in the Reproduction, Mobilisation and Coordination of Movements. *Political Studies*, 3(2), pp.31-43.